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Thurber's 'Supercamp' is graded 'A'

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Despite all the flap over the last few weeks about Marshall Thurber's "Super Schools", two Fort Collins area students who've attended say the accelerated learning schools are great.

Michelle and Billy Pigg, who attend Wellington Junior High School, attended a "Supercamp" at the Kirkwood Ski Resort in California during August.

"I loved it," said Michelle. "I really learned a lot."

The camp, for students in seventh through 12th grades, featured intensive three-hour classes in morning and afternoon, with free time in the late afternoon before a return to classes after dinner. Each night there were movies or dances for the students.

The atmosphere was very conducive to learning, according to Billy and Michelle, and the classes were more like play than school.

Although rules were set at the first session in the camp, students were responsible for themselves and expected to comply without being monitored.

"No one there put anyone else down," said Michelle. "They were all really supportive and they never let you get to feeling down or anything. If you looked like you might be a little down, someone would come over to you and say, 'you look like you need a hug, and give you a big hug.' It was great!"

The supercamps, which last 10 days, are primarily intended to give students learning tools which they can apply to their own school curriculum, according to Billy and Michelle's father, Ray Pigg, sales manager for The Neenan Company.

Supercamp literature says that in



Michelle Pigg



Billy Pigg

three major areas, average students' scores before and after the camp were conclusive evidence that the skills taught are beneficial.

In reading skills, students tested at 213 words per minute before the camp and 3,748 words per minute after, an increase of 2,100 percent, according to the literature.

In math, on a tri-level test, the students tested at 10 percent before the camp and 86 percent after, a gain of 860 percent.

In vocabulary, students tested at 27 percent accuracy on a test before the camp and 85 percent after, a gain of 315 percent.

Major subjects covered by the supercamps are speed reading, memory retention, spelling, test taking and study skills improvement, computers, vocabulary and math.

Tools like "mind mapping" and speed reading met mixed reviews from Billy and Michelle. "I loved the speed reading," said Billy. "When I started I could only read about 150 words per minute. But after the speed reading, I can read 11 pages a minute (approximately 1200 words per minute). I read a book in about 10 minutes and then took a test on it. There were about 20 questions on the test and I only missed 5 or 6.

"They tell you to read some things a little slower so you get the meaning better, like your school stuff. I love being able to read that fast."

Michelle, however, found that she couldn't catch the meaning of the story if she read fast. She decided that her normal reading speed of approximately 875 words per minute was fast enough for her.

"Mind mapping", a less formal method of outlining, was somewhat useful to both Michelle and Billy, but they both felt it would take some practice before they were able to use it very effectively in note taking. Both agreed it would be a useful tool when developed.

Michelle's favorite subject of the supercamp was the memory retention tools that were taught.

"They were pretty close to the same thing that I was already using, but he taught you really funny things to associate with things you wanted to remember. I can really remember things better. I have to have something really funny to be able to remember it well."

Billy offered an example: "I remember the symbol for gold by remembering that people say ahh, when they find gold. So I just remember AU (the symbol for gold) as ahh."

Both students credited the teachers at the supercamp for making learning exciting and fun. "They really got their point across," both said.

Although they would like to have school always as exciting and fun as the supercamps, the Piggs were not

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sure how the supercamp atmosphere could be transferred to a public school system.

Ray Pigg sympathizes with teachers in the public school system who must deal with large classes, unmotivated students and uncomfortable surroundings and then must prove to the

administration that they're educating the students.

"There are some kids who are in situations where no amount of help from the school is really going to make them good students," he said. "Those kids are just trying to survive."

It would be difficult to measure just

how much his children got from the supercamp that they attended, Pigg said, but he is happy with the attitude they returned with and the tools they gained to help them with their studies at Wellington.

"I think if I have the money, I'll send them back again next year," he said.

For Michelle, who was somewhat hesitant about going to supercamp at first, there is no question about her enthusiasm. "I'll tell anyone who asks how great it was. I learned so much and I made so many new friends. It was just great."

"I'm going back again next year, for sure."